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Desert beat with a bluesy twang

By David Honigmann

The Gambian musician Juldeh Camara plays the ritti, a one-stringed horsehair fiddle. The ritti is the signature instrument of Fulani traditional musicians. "We play it at marriage ceremonies, at naming ceremonies, at political meetings. And for fortune telling. You ask me a question, I play the ritti, and while I play the answer will come into my head."

A few years ago, Camara, who originally came to Britain in the 1990s as part of the group Ifang Bondi, asked his manager Duncan Noble to recommend some western music. He was entranced by one of the CDs Noble gave him, and back home in Gambia he started obsessively to play along with its spaced-out Maghrebi guitar rhythms. "I rang Duncan and said, 'who is this guitarist? Is he from Mali?' And he said 'no, he's English.'"

The CD in question was Desert Road by the guitarist and producer Justin Adams. Camara had been on the right lines when he misidentified it as Malian; since his childhood in Egypt, where his father was a diplomat, Adams has been obsessed with the music of North Africa and the Middle East. Last year he was perfectly cast as the musical director for the British Council's Music Matbakh project, bringing together musicians from six North African countries.

When Camara returned to England, the first thing he did was to ring Adams and propose a collaboration. Adams initially demurred, citing his commitments to tour with Robert Plant. Camara rang him again a couple of months later and this time played his ritti down the phone. Adams was awed by the "unearthly sound of the fiddle". He called his children to listen, and then invited Camara to his garage studio in Bath.

"When I arrived," says Camara, "Justin had already recorded some rhythms. I played along, just to get the feel, and he recorded it and said, 'that's great'. We recorded five songs that first day."

The grittily recorded CD that came out of those sessions, Soul Science, was released last autumn on Wayward/IRL. A few weeks ago, it won the pair a Radio 3 Award For World Music in the Culture Crossing category.

Justin Adams and Juldeh Camara at the Salisbury Festival Recently Adams and Camara were in Salisbury, on the last date of a tour supporting the Touareg rockers Tinariwen. Camara, in his griot robes, held his ritti up to the microphone and played intense, circular patterns, sounding at times like a flute and at times, when Adams was at his twangiest, more like an accompanying harmonica. Adams himself, in an old punk's outfit of black suit and cowboy shirt, threw Mick Jones shapes and leant hard into blues riffs. Behind them, Salah Dawson Miller conjured brittle rhythms out of a small array of percussion instruments.

Earlier Adams had insisted that "there's an Islamic thing in the blues that people don't recognise. The blues don't sound like Toumani Diabaté, they sound like the Fulani, the griots of the Niger." Now, as he bent his guitar notes like a muezzin, the music came full circle.

The tour has left Tinariwen exhausted; for Adams and Camara, basking in their Radio 3 Award, it is just the beginning. They now travel to festivals from Siberia – where they are promised a meeting with a Tuvan shaman – to Essaouira in Morocco.

If their musical partnership continues, it may take stranger forms. "I want to take a quantum leap," muses Adams. "Back home, Juldeh has a group with acrobats and dancers. I'd love to do a wild show like that. Bo Diddley meets the Fulani fire-eaters."